



The “me” behind the mask: Intellectually gifted students and the search for identity

Miraca U. M. Gross

From Roeper Review. 1998 Feb 20(3). Reprinted with permission.

The process of identity development in intellectually gifted children and adolescents is complicated by their innate and acquired differences from age-peers. To be valued within a peer culture which values conformity, gifted young people may mask their giftedness and develop alternative identities which are perceived as more socially acceptable. The weaving of this protective mask requires the gifted child to conceal her love of learning, her interests which differ from those of age-peers, and her advanced moral development. If this assumed identity does indeed bring her the social acceptance she seeks, the gifted child may become afraid to take off her mask. Gifted children and adolescents need the opportunity to work and socialize with others of similar abilities and interests if they are to grow towards self-acceptance. This article is illustrated by poetry and diary entries written by highly gifted young people, portraying the process of their own identity development.

“I have come to the conclusion that the degree of my difference from most people exceeds the average of most people’s difference from one another; or, to put it more briefly, that my reactions to many things don’t conform to popular patterns.” (C.E.M. Joad, 1947.)

During the 1940s and 1950s, one of the most popular radio programs in Britain was The Brains Trust in which a panel of intellectuals, entertainers or politicians, chosen for their skill with words and ideas, responded to questions sent in by listeners. One of the most popular panelists was Professor C.E.M. Joad, a brilliant scholar and gifted writer who had a remarkable ability to explain highly complex, sometimes controversial theories in language that made them accessible, and, indeed, fascinating to the layperson.

Joad was extremely precise in his response to questions. He was constantly aware of the ambiguity of the language in which the questions were often phrased and he was anxious to ensure that his answer was both accurate and clearly understood. His somewhat pedantic response to almost any question; “It all depends on what you mean by...” was greeted by the studio audience with the delighted and affectionate laughter with which they would have greeted the catchphrase of a favorite comedian. Few listeners understood the urge which prompted the response — Joad’s *need* to define the terms of the question both for himself and for the audience, to delineate the grey areas, and to clarify precisely those aspects to which he felt he could respond. For this gentle, scholarly man, the careful and deliberate qualification with which he started his response was an integral and essential *part* of the answer.

Despite his skill and popularity as a communicator, Joad found personal relationships difficult. As the above quotation shows, he was constantly aware of his difference from the great majority of people, and the degree of that difference. It was typical of this great scholar that his analysis of the degree of difference has almost a statistical flavor! Linked to this awareness was the ever-present longing for congenial companionship, and the knowledge, bought with experience, that he was unlikely to find it. Indeed, a few years before his death, he confided to a colleague, “My life is spent in a perpetual alternation between two rhythms, the rhythm of attracting people for fear I may be lonely, and the rhythm of getting rid of them because I know that I am bored” (Joad, 1948).

Like many other highly gifted adults, Joad had developed a range of professional identities within which he was accepted by others - the scholar, the writer, the broadcaster. It was, however, extremely difficult for him to maintain productive social relationships. The characteristics, attitudes and opinions which people accepted in Joad the scholar were a hindrance in his attempts to develop an identity as a private individual. As he himself phrased it, his “reactions to many things” did not “conform to popular patterns.”

The task of identity development begins in early childhood and continues through life. For many highly gifted people, such as Cyril Joad, identity formulation is complicated by factors related to, or arising from, their difference from the majority of people with whom they must associate at school and in adult life. This article explores two issues: firstly, that gifted people mask and camouflage their identities not because of any inherent problem, but because the social environments in which they live and work often cannot, or will not, provide the freedom for them to be themselves; secondly, that gifted children and adults need help in defining their identity in contexts which do not allow for their innate and acquired differences.

The Development of Identity

Steinberg (1985) lists five sets of psychosocial concerns which affect our lives as we progress from childhood to adulthood, intensifying in the adolescent years. These are: the development of identity — the quest for a personal sense of self and an

acceptance of one's individuality; the growth of autonomy — the process of establishing oneself as an independent, self-determining individual; the search for intimacy and the establishment of peer relationships based on trust, openness, and a similarity of values; the management of one's developing sexuality; and the need to achieve, and be recognized for one's achievements.

These five concerns interact and exert considerable influence on each other and for the majority of adolescents they are compatible, indeed complementary. However, for intellectually gifted young people, particularly the highly gifted, the drives for identity, autonomy and achievement may conflict with the need for intimacy. Gross (1989) discusses the "forced choice dilemma" which confronts the gifted child whose desire to excel in an area of talent which is undervalued by her¹ agemates conflicts with her need to be accepted by the peer culture. If she is to satisfy her drive for excellence and perform at the level of which she knows she is capable, she may risk sacrificing the attainment of intimacy with age-peers who may be disconcerted by, or even resentful of, her abilities. If the pursuit of intimacy is her primary need, she must moderate her standards of achievement, conceal, to some extent at least, her intellectual interests, and conform to a value system that may be seriously at variance with her own levels of emotional or moral development. Gross (1989) proposes that this conflict between the two normally complementary drives of intimacy and achievement may be the central psychosocial dilemma of gifted youth. To resolve it, many highly gifted children retreat behind a mask of social conformity.

In his work on identity development, Erikson (1968) describes the identifications the child forms over the years with parents, siblings, teachers, peers and others on whom she is encouraged to model her behaviors, attitudes and desires. Her task is to select, from the smorgasbord of possible identities which are presented to her, those that best fit her current perceptions of who she is and what she might become. This process of selection may involve a period of role experimentation, during which the child tries on a number of different personalities in an attempt to discover her true self.

The process of identity development, therefore, requires a period of role experimentation - selecting aspects of oneself which one will develop (usually those aspects which are deemed acceptable by the peer culture) and discarding those which are less valued, or even denigrated. Unfortunately, the role models with which the gifted child is encouraged to identify are likely to be adults or children who have been successful in a culture which rewards social and ideological conformity, and which values a comfortable and non-threatening mediocrity. *In fact, these models are unlikely to be intellectually gifted* (Schunk, 1987). What happens, then, if the identity that the peer group applauds and accepts is a false identity with which the gifted child herself feels uncomfortable—an identity based on surface similarities but with no real depth? More importantly, what happens if the gifted child comes to believe that her true identity is based not on superficial similarities to the peer group, but on differences—differences that they are unlikely to understand, ignore or forgive?

The Early Onset Of Adolescence

Changes in the way in which individuals perceive themselves and feel about themselves, occur throughout the life cycle. Even quite young children can be aware of other people's positive or negative impressions of them and will alter their behavior to model what they perceive to be desirable attributes or attitudes. The gifted child's search for an identity which makes her acceptable to the children with whom she has to work and socialize may be well established by the middle years of elementary school.

The majority of research on identity development ignores the childhood years and focuses on adolescence. Many researchers assume that, prior to adolescence, children have a limited capacity for abstract reasoning (Keating and Bobbitt, 1978), that their thinking is oriented to the here and now—things they can observe directly—rather than to possibilities (Steinberg, 1985), and that they are less likely to analyze their relationships with others or speculate on how relationships could be improved (Hill and Palmquist, 1978). A wealth of research, however, reveals the degree to which intellectually gifted children begin to walk and speak earlier than their age-peers, and move through the stages of speech and mobility acquisition more rapidly (Terman, 1925; Jersild, 1960; Silverman, 1989; Gross, 1992, 1993b), learn to read earlier, and prefer books written for children several years older (Hollingworth, 1926; VanTassel-Baska, 1983; Gross, 1993a), and use information processing strategies normally utilized by children some years older (Kanevsky, 1990).

A similar precocity of development is evident in the socio-affective domain. For instance, the advanced development of moral reasoning in gifted students has intrigued researchers for the last 70 years (outlined in Gross, 1993a). Emotional sensitivity, and the capacity to empathize and feel compassion, is visible in some gifted children from surprisingly early ages (Gross, 1989; Silverman, 1983).

Indeed, many of the behaviors, attitudes and needs which are characteristic of adolescence appear in intellectually gifted children in the middle or later years of childhood. The psychosocial drives towards identity, autonomy, intimacy and achieve-

ment can be expected to intensify earlier in intellectually gifted children than in children of average ability, and intensification of these drives can increase the feeling of salience - even alienation - in the gifted young person who is already aware that she is different.

The Awareness of Difference

How early do intellectually gifted children become aware of the ways in which they differ from age-peers? This, of course, depends on the individual and is influenced by a range of factors including personality, level of giftedness and the family's response to the child's difference. The majority of gifted children, however, become aware of their difference at surprisingly early ages. This is, in part, because the differences in physiological development which characterize the intellectually gifted child appear at such an early age, are so immediately visible, and are often commented on in the child's presence or within her hearing. It is difficult not to notice (or to conceal!) an eager toddler who is speaking in sentences by her first birthday, or who is trotting around independently at 10 months of age (Gross, 1993a). Family members, adult friends, and even total strangers notice and comment on the young child's verbal or physical precocity. Generally at this stage, the comments are positive or at least neutral. No one assumes that an early walker or early talker has been hotheaded by a doting parent.

When early and unusually mature speech is accompanied by early reading, however, reaction from the community can be very different. Among intellectually gifted children, at least 50% of the moderately gifted (IQ range 130-144) and at least 80% of the highly gifted (IQ of 145+) enter school already reading (VanTassel-Baska, 1983; Gross, 1993a). It is not uncommon for highly gifted youngsters to teach themselves to read before the age of four, through television, street signs and the many other sources of print freely available in the community.

Teachers often assume that a child who enters school already reading must have been taught to read by her parents, and many teachers resent this. Virtually every child in this author's study of 53 Australian children of IQ 160+ (Gross, 1992, 1993a, 1994) entered school with the reading skills of children aged seven, eight or older, but where the children's teachers commented to the parents on this unusual reading advancement, the majority of comments centered not on the quality of the child's reading but on the presumed involvement of the parent. Comments such as, "It's not fair to hothead her like that", "Let him be a child; he'll have to grow up soon enough", and "There's no point in pushing her like that; the others will catch up anyway" are common. It is disturbing to note the frequency with which these critical comments have been made by teachers *in the presence of the child*.

Another factor in the gifted child's early recognition of her difference is the early onset of norm-referenced behavior. As children move through the pre-school and primary years, the egocentricity of early childhood gradually gives place to an awareness of the opinions, abilities and achievements of others. This shift in perspective is more closely linked to mental age than to chronological age; thus a highly gifted child of four or five may have already reached a stage of norm-referenced behavior which her age-peers of average ability may not reach till seven or eight. She may notice, even at that early age, that the other children in her pre-school cannot yet read or count, that their vocabulary is more restricted, and that the games they like are the kind of thing *she* liked a year or so before.

For all these reasons, the gifted child is likely to become aware, at an early age, that she is different from the children around her. Contrary to popular myth, however, this awareness rarely leads to feelings of conceit or superiority. Rather, gifted children are likely to blame themselves for the discrepancies between themselves and their age-peers. Tolan (1987) offers a telling illustration.

"One of the problems gifted children often face in school has to do with their being developmentally out of synch with their chronological peers... A gifted six-year-old first grader may have reached the level of development (normally reached between the ages of eight and nine) at which she especially likes games with complex rules. She plays the simpler games the other six-year-olds like to play on the playground, and then she suggests that they play one of her favorites. The other children refuse. How does she interpret this rejection? Seldom with a sense that she is better than they. She is more likely to think, "They don't like me." And it is a very short step from 'they don't like me' to 'I'm not likable'." (p. J85).

The more highly gifted the child, the greater is the likelihood that she will experience difficulties in social relationships with children of her own age. Hollingworth (1926), defined the IQ range 125-155 as "socially optimal intelligence" and noted that while children scoring within this range are well-balanced, self-confident and outgoing individuals who are able to win the confidence and friendship of age-peers, above the level of IQ 160 the difference between the exceptionally gifted child and her age-mates is so great that it leads to special problems of development which are correlated with social isolation. She noted that these difficulties become particularly acute between the ages of four and nine (Hollingworth, 1931).



However, both Hollingworth and subsequent researchers studying exceptionally and profoundly gifted children (Sheldon, 1959; DeHaan and Havighurst, 1961; Janos, 1983; Gross, 1993a) noted that the social isolation experienced by these children is not the clinical isolation of emotional disturbance. It does not arise from the child's giftedness itself, but is caused by the absence of a suitable peer group with whom to relate.

A further issue which may arise from this isolation is the emotional cost to the gifted child of having to compromise both her process of identity formulation, and the development of her academic potential, for the sake of peer acceptance. More than 80% of the children of IQ 160+ studied by this author report that the intense social isolation they experience in the inclusion classroom, and the perpetual self-monitoring of their own behavior in attempts to conform to the social and cultural expectations of the peer group, combined with an unchallenging and repetitive curriculum, result in extreme and ongoing intellectual and emotional frustration (Gross, 1993a). In her remarkable poem, Anna, aged 8, describes the rage, pain and bewilderment of the highly gifted child in a state of identity diffusion — "the incoherent, disjointed, incomplete sense of self" (Steinberg, 1985, p. 405) more usually characteristic of the *adolescent* who has not yet resolved the crisis of identity successfully.

Frustration

Frustration is there, everyway I look,
Grasping at me, like some expensive jewel.
It wells up inside me like an inflating balloon
just waiting to explode.
It gnaws at my mind
Chewing at all particles of thought.
It distracts my brain from concentrating,
Like an itching mosquito bite.
It sucks me downwards into a churning
whirlpool of anger.
I am confused, my thoughts feel like dice in a cup.
They dart dizzily around my head
in a trance-like state.
It forces me ferociously about
If I resist this horrible force it only puts me in pain.
When I am in this hypnotic state
Pressure engulfs me like a thick blanket.
I become its faithful servant.
Its every wish is my command
and my body is dull and lifeless.

Elizabeth, a profoundly gifted young woman, wrote the following poignant self-analysis a few days before her 16th birthday, when she had finally accepted, after many years of struggling against her difference, that the normalcy she strove for was not something she would ever reach.

"I am different, and I know I am, but despite statements to the contrary, this society is a very conformist one, and it is very difficult for me to give up all hope of being "normal" — that ideal that is undefined but is that which I am not. People say I should be proud of what I have accomplished, but to me it is not what I have accomplished; it is who I am... I learn the way I was born learning, and I have tried, repeatedly, painfully and unsuccessfully, to train myself out of it. If it is that ability they are praising, they should praise my genes, for it is something that only now am I seeing as desirable, not a burden placed on me in return for some future reward... A philosopher's argument is that in order to know true happiness one must have experienced true pain, but I would rather cling to the hope that someday someone like me will grow up without that tinge of guilt, and longing to be something that they are both told is lesser, and at the same time, more 'normal' than they."

The need to escape from such bewilderment, frustration and loneliness may become a compelling force. If the gifted child believes that significant elements of who and what she is are unacceptable to her age-peers, she may invest considerable time and energy in determining what behaviors, attitudes and interests are acceptable, and adopting these as a form of protective coloring.

Weaving The Mask Coleman (1985) suggests that gifted children realize, quite early, that other people's behavior towards them changes when their difference becomes evident. Accordingly, the gifted child attempts to manipulate the information others have about her by skillfully adapting her behavior and performance to conform to the social and educational norms of her age-

group. To protect themselves from peer rejection, highly gifted children can become masters of camouflage (Gross, 1993a), concealing and shielding their developing identity behind a more acceptable facade.

This facility to blend in to the group can have a profound effect both on the young child's academic performance and on her social behavior. For instance, the majority of highly gifted students enter school with the reading accuracy and comprehension of students several years older (VanTassel-Baska, 1983; Silverman, 1989), yet if the teacher does not recognize and respond to this precocity, the gifted young child may stop reading, or deliberately decrease the quality and quantity of her reading, after only a few weeks. More than 70% of the early readers in Gross's study of children of IQ 160+ radically modified their in-class reading performance or stopped reading altogether within the first four weeks of school (Gross, 1993a). Interestingly, their reading at home continued unabated with no decrease in quality. The modification of their in-class reading standards was in response to a strongly felt need to conform to the behavior of their peers.

The gifted child who has learned in her early years to conceal her true abilities may, as she moves through school, slip further and further behind a screen of camouflage. The process of "blending in" (Coleman, 1985) involves the adoption, at least in public, not only of the behaviors, but also the values and attitudes of the group to which one wishes to belong.

Swiatek (1995), in her study of 238 mathematically and verbally gifted adolescents, reported a number of strategies through which these highly gifted young people attempted to minimize the visibility of their giftedness. Disturbingly, she found a tendency among the most highly gifted students to actively deny that they were gifted at all. Buescher and Higham (1989) likewise noted a tendency in 13 and 14-year-old gifted adolescents to disassociate themselves from activities which would identify them as gifted, while seeking to cultivate second "identities" in more socially acceptable fields such as music, debating, photography or athletics.

Highly gifted adolescents or adults who spend much of their lives concealing their true abilities and interests behind a protective mask, risk losing touch with their innermost feelings and beliefs. The realization in adulthood, of how much one has denied one's giftedness in earlier years, can be cathartic, but learning to redefine oneself as a gifted individual can be a healing experience. This process of redefinition may be initiated by encountering other gifted people with whom one can identify.

Earlier this year, Philip Wilson, a highly gifted young man in his early thirties, read *Exceptionally Gifted Children*, a book documenting the first 10 years of Gross's study (Gross, 1993a) and wrote to the author describing his feelings of identification with the children in the book. *"It was a rather curious, comforting feeling, like having a well-known favorite spot that one goes to as a child, or coming home after being away, or finding a piece to a jigsaw"* (Wilson, 1997).

Philip had adopted, in adolescence, the technique described by Buescher and Higham (1989), camouflaging his extraordinary intellectual capacities and developing an alternative identity as a sports and athletic star within his high school. Like many highly gifted young people, he had been aware from an early age that he was different from his friends, and at first he had found this difficult to understand.

"Initially I thought I was a bit weird, but I was quite good at being normal as long as I stuck to those things that everyone else spoke about and did, and I was pretty keen to be accepted. So good was I, in fact, at being "normal" that I began to wonder who I really was underneath. I happened to be good at sport and that seemed to stand me in good stead throughout my school career In high school I found that while I got some hassle for being the brainy kid, I don't remember it being intolerable. My sporting activities seemed to ameliorate this and went a long way towards making my academic side palatable to the throng. My scholastic achievements seemed to be quite O.K. as long as they sort of stayed in the background, and as long as I remained accomplished athletically. I remember thinking that I was good at sport because I thought very hard about how to do something well. It struck me as ironic, that it was ultimately still my brain that was making me credible, albeit indirectly" (Wilson, 1997).

The Love That Dare Not Speak Its Name

Philip's talent in sport allowed him to be forgiven for being gifted intellectually — as long as he allowed his intellectual gifts to remain in the shadow of his sporting prowess. He was expected to show a passion for sport, but he had to conceal his deeper love of learning.

"One of the basic characteristics of the gifted is their intensity and an expanded field of their subjective experience. The intensity, in particular; must be understood as a qualitatively distinct characteristic. It is not a matter of degree, but of a different quality of experiencing: vivid, absorbing, penetrating, encompassing, complex, commanding — a way of being quiveringly alive (Piechowski, 1991, p. 181).

The intensity of feeling which Piechowski describes is often characteristic of the intellectually gifted and is visible in their

passionate love of learning. Dante called it “the mind in love” (Dante, date uncertain). The *need* for intellectual challenge; the burning desire to acquire new knowledge; the longing, when it is once experienced, to be caught up again in the almost sensual ecstasy that Csikszentmihalyi (1993) calls “flow”; the joy in intellectual argument and the meeting of like minds; the fascination with the nuances of language; the passionate engagement with learning for learning’s sake; and the desire and need for intellectual stimulation, can be over-whelming. And it is this desire and this passion that intellectually gifted children must deny when they deny their giftedness.

Oscar Wilde, applauded for his demonstrated talents as a playwright, but ostracized for the homosexuality which was part of his private identity, called homosexual love “the love that dare not speak its name.” Has the love of learning now become “the love that dare not speak its name”?

The process of self-acceptance and acceptance of one’s gift demands great courage.

“Periods of intense emotional growth can bring on such sudden inner shifts as to produce moments of disequilibrium and estrangement. One feels at odds with the surroundings, as if suddenly alien to what was familiar before. Feelings of unreality are the natural product of great emotional intensity and of feeling ‘different’” (Piechowski, 1997, p.376).

Alexa, a highly gifted Scottish girl of 13, wrote the following poem when she was going through a stage of profound self-questioning. From the time she was 7 or 8 years old her remarkable gift for poetry had aroused such hostility and resentment from her elementary school classmates that she had retreated behind a carefully woven mask which portrayed a rather immature, childish little girl with a single, freakish, talent. Eventually, however, the questioning voices within herself could not be stilled and she found herself at a crossroads; should she accept the challenge from her inner self to begin the painful growth towards self-actualization as a poet and an individual, or should she retreat further behind the mask of the “silly wee thing” from whom little could be expected. With a certain wry awareness that her dilemma was, indeed, part of the process of growth, Alexa titled her poem “Adolescence”; this awareness, however, did not diminish the pain and self-doubt she was experiencing.

Adolescence

Was it a moment or a thousand years
That passed since I was still a child, and free?
No new emotions, no embarrassed fears
Disrupted my serene simplicity.
Perhaps my very childishness became
A rampart wall protecting me from pain.
Half-formed desires, new thoughts I could not name
Stirred, strove for life, and quickly died again.
But now, defenseless, facing adulthood
I stand, half-lonely, half-afraid, unsure.
Those feelings once I thought I understood
Have changed, become bewildering, obscure.
Now from maturity’s once-longed for shore
I shrink, and pray to be a child once more.

Alexa’s poem illustrates the feelings of “disequilibrium and estrangement” described by Piechowski (1997). Her former acceptance of the “necessity” for a protective mask were being challenged by the strengthening, in adolescence, of the drives towards identity, autonomy and achievement; her feelings about her self-concealment “have changed, become bewildering, obscure.” Although the poem ends on a note of doubt and seeming retreat, Alexa did manage to conquer her fears, and begin the process of self-acceptance. Placement in an ability grouped program for gifted students gave her access to other gifted girls with whom she could identify. “In a very real sense I am my poetry,” she said, “and if I show only my poetry and not the ‘Me’ that is behind it, then I am denying the poetry as well as denying myself.”

Moral Development and the Search for Identity

The advanced development of moral reasoning in gifted students has intrigued researchers for many years. Terman (1925) reported that on tests of “trustworthiness” and “moral stability” the average 9-year-old in his study of children of IQ 135+ scored at levels more usually attained by children aged 14. Hollingworth (1942) noted, in her studies of children of IQ 180+, a passionate concern for ethical and moral issues and a deep and unusually mature interest in questions of origin, destiny and man’s relationship with God. More recent studies of highly gifted children (Gross, 1993a; Silverman, 1993) report similar findings.

Intellectually gifted children move through the stages of moral development at ages significantly younger than is customary. Studies of highly gifted children have found some elementary school students functioning at the post-conventional levels attained by only 10% of adults (Kohlberg, 1964). This can cause considerable emotional conflict for the gifted child who has to interact daily with other children who are still functioning at levels appropriate to their age, and who may be quite incapable of appreciating, or even understanding, the issues which are troubling the gifted student. The following three case studies, from this author's research on the psychosocial development of the highly gifted, illustrate the difficulties which can confront gifted children whose search for identity is complicated by the discrepancies in moral development between themselves and their classmates.

Leon's fourth grade class was terrorized by Michael, a huge, physically aggressive boy whose behavior was quite uncontrollable. Their teacher spent the majority of her time trying to restrain Michael, and very little teaching or learning was occurring. Furthermore, Michael was extremely aggressive and physically violent towards the younger children in the playground. Repeated meetings between the principal and parents of the younger children seemed to have little effect.

Leon was extremely concerned and decided that since other action had failed, it was up to the students themselves to make the principal appreciate the seriousness of the situation. He wrote a petition to the principal — a polite but frank letter in which he described the situation in his classroom and explained that his teacher needed help to control Michael's behavior because the children in the class were learning very little, and that the younger children were in physical danger from Michael's uncontrollable violence. Every child in Leon's class (except Michael, of course!) signed the petition, and he gained the signatures of over 130 children in the school.

The principal's reaction to the petition was to call a school assembly and publicly unleash on Leon a tirade of anger. He accused Leon of trying to subvert his authority and of "manipulating" the other children into signing a "pointless and destructive" letter. The message of the letter was left unaddressed; the messenger was publicly "shot".

Leon was devastated. Ironically, it had been he who had consistently defused the anger of the other boys against Michael. They had wanted to gang up on the bully and give him a severe physical beating, but Leon had pointed out that meeting violence with violence would not solve anything, and that the ongoing problem of Michael's behavior had to be addressed at administrative level if a lasting solution were to be found. He had tried to handle the situation fairly and democratically by showing the principal the extent of student concern, and instead the principal had accused him of deviousness and manipulation.

"The principal abused his power just as Michael abuses *his*," said Leon in despair. "How can society work when people who are trusted with power abuse it?"

At the time of this incident, Leon was nine years old.

Emma, in seventh grade, was deeply moved by a television program about the Czechoslovakian struggle for freedom from the U.S.S.R. She lay awake most of the night and the next morning she started, haltingly, to describe, to some of the other girls in her class, the pain and bewilderment of the Czechoslovakian women. The other girls looked her up and down, raised their eyebrows, and ostentatiously walked away.

Emma realized her mistake, and the next day she engaged the girls in a spirited conversation about clothes and make-up. They accepted her back, with relief. She was wearing the right mask.

Darren, aged 10, was a student at an inner-city school notorious for playground violence, truancy and low achievement. To retain membership of the peer culture Darren had to conceal, from his classmates, his extremely high academic ability, his love of reading, and his enhanced moral development. He was a brilliant actor, and neither his teachers nor his friends had any idea of the swift mind and compassionate heart that were masked by his tough exterior, but he lived in a continual state of siege, believing that any breach in his armor might reveal the "real" Darren and lay him open to contempt and rejection.

One morning he arrived in the playground to find his "gang" brutally tormenting a lame dog that had wandered into the yard. Darren was sickened by the sight. An added concern was that several five- and six-year-olds were standing round watching the older boys with the dog, and Darren was keenly aware of the extent to which these younger children modeled themselves on the playground leaders, and sought to emulate their behavior.

As many times before, Darren was in a quandary. If he showed his disgust and told his mates to leave the dog alone, he would be jeered at and would lose face. If he tried to suggest that their behavior was giving a poor example to the impressionable younger kids, they would laugh him to scorn; indeed, they would find his attitude quite incomprehensible. So, as often before, he allowed his quick wits to find an escape route; he raced over to his gang shouting that the teacher on yard duty was coming round the corner. His mates released the dog, and the younger kids wandered off; the show was over.

However, discussing the incident with this author, Darren spoke frankly and despairingly about his dilemma. He described it as



like riding on the back of a tiger. His position was precarious, but to dismount was to court disaster. "The longer I fool them, the more they're going to resent it when they find out," he said, "but you've got to have mates and there's nobody round here who's anything like me, so they're all I've got. But I don't know how long I'm going to be able to keep going."

"It's getting to the stage that I'm beginning to dislike myself," he said softly. "I don't really approve of telling lies and I'm having to tell them all the time. I'm even telling lies about myself to myself. I'm going to end up not knowing who I really am."

Leon, Emma and Darren are functioning at levels of moral judgment far beyond those of their age-peers, and each of them is tackling this dilemma, and the associated issue of identity, in his or her own way. Leon has tried to "wear his own face". Emma allowed her mask to slip, but was swift and clever enough to slip it back on before she lost the acceptance of her peer group. Darren, even by age 10, was engaged in such a complex matrix of social deception that he feared that he was beginning to lose his own sense of identity.

Leon, Emma and Darren have taken on alternative identities to lessen the risk of being rejected, and socially isolated, by other children. Yet, ironically, the mask may also conceal the wearer from herself. If the gifted child is not assisted to move towards self-acceptance, the sense of depersonalization so poignantly described by Darren — the sense of standing alone in a void, out of touch even with oneself — can continue into adulthood.

Identity Diffusion in Adulthood

The formulation of a secure personal identity and the attainment of intimacy are two of the primary tasks of adolescence. One aspect of identity achievement is the process of finding a niche in the society or community which one wishes to enter. Of equal importance is a realistic appreciation of one's own strengths and goals.

Highly gifted young people who, because of society's wary or hostile response to their difference, have been unable to form warm and supportive relationships of intimacy in youth, may find it difficult to develop sound interpersonal relationships in adulthood. Some may choose to adopt the role of social isolate, finding, at last, a certain comfort in the freedom from personal ties. Einstein (1940), in a philosophical treatise, wrote, "I live in that solitude which is painful in youth, but delicious in the years of maturity." Later he outlined his feelings of detachment from society.

"My passionate sense of social justice and social responsibility has always contrasted oddly with my pronounced freedom from the need for contact with other human beings and human communities. I "gang my ain gate" and have never belonged to my country, my home, my friends or even my immediate family, with my whole heart; in the face of all these ties, I have never lost an obstinate sense of detachment, of the need for solitude — a feeling which increases with the years. One is sharply conscious, yet without regret, of the limits to the possibility of mutual understanding and sympathy with one's fellow creatures. Such a person no doubt loses something in the way of geniality and lightheartedness; on the other hand, he is largely independent of the opinions, habits and judgments of his fellows, and avoids the temptation to take his stand on such insecure foundations. (Einstein, 1940, p.3).

Einstein was writing with the self-awareness of maturity. Few young people can take such a dispassionate or even welcoming view of their isolation from social companionship - and, indeed, even Einstein acknowledged that his solitude was "painful in youth." The camouflaging, masking, and blending in which are so prevalent among gifted youth, are strategies designed to escape isolation and increase the likelihood of social acceptance.

George Bernard Shaw, who suffered severe social isolation in youth, sought partial escape by burying himself in the great literature of the past. Shaw talked of his search for identity and intimacy as:

"... complicated by a deeper strangeness which has made me all my life a sojourner on this planet rather than a native of it. Whether it be that I was born mad or a little too sane, my kingdom was not of this world; I was at home only in the realm of my imagination, and at ease only with the mighty dead... Therefore I had to become an actor and create for myself a fantastic personality fit and apt for dealing with men, and adaptable to the various parts I had to play as author, journalist, orator; politician, committee man, man of the world, and so forth." (Shaw, 1952, p.65.)

Shaw, the dramatist with a dazzling array of masks behind which he concealed the absence of any true sense of identity, and Einstein, removing himself gently but firmly from the obligations of social intimacy, represent two extremes in identity diffusion. Yet they illustrate what can befall the highly gifted individual who has not succeeded, in youth, in establishing a sense of identity and a sense of belonging. He may come to believe, like Cyril Joad, that the differences between himself and the people with whom he has to associate are so much greater than the differences *among* them, that there is little hope of finding someone with similar values, or beliefs, or interests. It is not surprising if he begins to perceive himself as apart from, rather than a part of the wider community.

Elizabeth, whose analysis of her difference, and her response to it was quoted earlier, is, at age 18, a senior in college, having been radically accelerated through elementary and high school. She affirms that she would have grown up very differently if she had been retained in the inclusion classroom with no access to intellectual peers, withdrawing into herself and mimicking social interactions rather than participating in them.

"I can't imagine that I would still be me if I had to sit through that many years of school and still have so many left to go... I think I could have kept my mind intact, but only with a very small, narrow channel through which my thoughts could be communicated to the outside world. I was building a veritable fortress around myself and I think it would have continued growing and growing, setting me further and further apart from the rest of the world, making the world more and more of a stage for me to watch and try and make my life alone in the castle resemble..."

Elizabeth is certain that if she had not been permitted to accelerate, she would have retreated into a secret place within herself, observing life being enacted, as it were, on a stage, but playing little part in it. Ironically, the three highly gifted adults, Joad, Shaw and Einstein, whose difficulties in personal relationships were discussed earlier, communicated for the most part either from a stage or through a medium which did not even require them to be physically present with their audience. Shaw acknowledged that he put many of his deepest personal and social philosophies into the mouths of the characters in his plays (Shaw, 1952). Einstein communicated his ideas most powerfully through his books and papers. Joad was at his best in the safely impersonal medium of radio; in the 1940s, before the advent of mass television, few of the millions of listeners who tuned into *The Brains Trust* each week would have recognized him if they passed him in the street. The public personae of these three brilliant men became the masks behind which they concealed the lack of a personal identity and a deep insecurity about personal relationships.

Silverman (1997) points out that the capacity to love others cannot develop fully until one has learned to love oneself. She indicates that the process involves several stages: self-awareness, finding kindred spirits, feeling understood and accepted by others, self-acceptance, recognition of the differences in others, and, eventually the development of understanding, acceptance and appreciation of others. Thus, the capacity to develop strong and lasting friendships cannot develop in the gifted individual until she herself has experienced the glad peace of being understood and accepted by "kindred spirits" — people of similar abilities, values and interests.

Self-acceptance — acceptance of one's self— is an essential stage in identity formation and in the development of sound interpersonal relationships. Cyril Joad never reached that stage. Through effective interventions, Anna, Alexa and Elizabeth are growing towards it.

As educators and community members it is in our power, and it is our responsibility, to help our gifted students seek for and accept, with love, "the me behind the mask".

Miraca Gross teaches at the University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia.

Herrnstein and Murray (1994) propose that when authors wish to assign a gender to a fictitious person to illustrate a point, the gender of the first author should be used. This writer believes this to be a practical alternative to the current, ungrammatical practice, for the sake of "political correctness", of appending plural pronouns to singular nouns, e.g. "As the gifted child approaches adolescence, they find their abilities distance them from their age-peers. Accordingly, she and her are used throughout this paper, except where the subject of the specific case study or other illustration is male.

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